



Rabbi Rachel Timoner

Lech Lecha 5784

October 28, 2023 Fourth Shabbat of the Israel-Hamas War

Harry and Delancey, thank you for those beautiful divrei Torah about Abraham and Sarah, the first Jews. Delancey, you taught us that out of Abraham and Sarah a variety of expressions of Jewish life developed – and here at CBE we try to make room for that diversity. And Harry, you taught us that Avram and Sarai's name changes were a way to expand their identities. Abraham became not just the first Jew, but the father of many nations, ultimately the ancestor of both Jews and Muslims, which is so relevant to us today.

As I'm sure you'd expect, I need to speak this morning about the war between Israel and Hamas, and all that is happening here in response. As everyone knows, the gruesome atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7 against innocent people, who were hunted down, tortured, murdered and taken hostage, have plunged Israel and the Jewish people into the worst crisis of our generation. Two weeks ago, I gave a long and full sermon about the attacks and the war. A lot has happened since then. And this is again is going to be long.

Here in our congregation we learned that we have several members whose relatives and friends were murdered, and two cousins of our member Noga Rotstein are currently hostages in Gaza. We are focusing our support on the kibbutz of K'far Aza, where two of our members' family lived, a community that has seen utter destruction and devastation from the pogrom, and whose evacuated survivors are traumatized and in great need. Also in these three weeks, thousands of Palestinians in Gaza have been killed by Israeli bombs, many of them children. A massive humanitarian crisis is underway, as an already hungry and impoverished population do not have enough food, water, or electricity. A million Palestinians have fled their homes per Israeli warning, but

without safe passage or anywhere safe to go. And now communications are down as the bombardment intensifies and it's possible that the ground war is beginning.

In the last three weeks, we've gathered as a community many times and in many ways, to cry, to comfort one another, to pray, to support our Israeli family, to support each other as we try to make our way through a climate of hate and misinformation; and to talk through the true moral complexity of this war.

So many of you are struggling to navigate very significant anti-semitism and anti-Israel bias in your workplaces, on your college campuses, in your schools, on social media, in your neighborhoods, and on the streets of New York. This week, some of you had to paint over anti Jewish graffiti on your block, had to walk through angry anti-Israel protests on the way home from work, faced DEI staff at your workplaces who were openly biased against Israelis and Jews, had to advocate at your children's schools when students or teachers make the case that Israel is not a legitimate country, had to experience a total lack of empathy for the brutal murder and kidnapping of our people from coworkers and friends.

In 2023 so far, we've been through a neo-Nazi National Day of Hate, the worst pogrom since the Holocaust, Hamas' Day of Global Jihad against the Jewish people, and many protests that included swastikas and anti Jewish hatred..And this Shabbat happens to be five years since the massacre at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. As many of you have probably heard, graffiti was found yesterday morning on the sidewalk in front of our building, a little bit on our building and on the mailbox in front of our building. The graffiti said the following things. Jews for a Free Palestinian Resistance. Free Palestine. Israel kills kids every day. Gays for Gaza. Save Gaza Save Humanity.

First of all, in general we are against war. War is a terrible thing. Every effort must be made to save and protect every single innocent Palestinian life, just as every effort must be made to save and protect every single innocent Israeli life. That is vital, and I will say more about that in a moment. War should only ever be the last resort, but this is a moment of last resort. Israel has the responsibility, the obligation, to defend its people when they are attacked and murdered in their beds, to bring back its citizens who are currently being held as hostages in tunnels underground, including babies, children, and old people; and to weaken

Hamas to prevent them from doing anything like this again. The question is how they do that.

The left and progressive movements who are marching in the streets and chanting slogans, as they will this afternoon in our neighborhood, *have it wrong about Hamas*. Hamas are not the good guys.

We need everyone to understand a few things about that.

1. Hamas does not represent most Palestinians in Gaza. In a poll taken just before the war, only 26 percent of Gazans said that the government was responsive to the needs of the people. When asked what is the most effective way for ordinary people to influence the government, a plurality said, "nothing is effective." And only 20 percent of Gazans agree with Hamas's approach of military action to destroy the state of Israel. Instead, 54 percent said they favor the two state solution outlined in the 1993 Oslo accords, in which the state of Palestine would sit alongside the state of Israel, on the borders that existed before the 1967 Six Day War. In other words, a majority of Gazans do not want Hamas and do want a two state solution.
2. One of the sick things we learned in these last two weeks is that each Hamas fighter was promised \$10,000 and an apartment if they captured an Israeli hostage.
3. Hamas is a proxy of Iran, whose Islamist government not only violently represses Iranian women, but has proxies all around Israel – Hezbollah in Lebanon which is currently attacking Israel in the north, as well as militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, which are preventing all of those countries from having their own stable governments, and which are all launching rockets or drones against Israel. Hamas staged this brutal attack right when Israel and Saudi Arabia were moving toward an alliance, which threatens Iran's power in the region. Supporting Iran is not a left or progressive cause, but Hamas is a proxy of Iran.
4. The fact that Hamas still now, three weeks into the war, is able to shoot long-range rockets into Israel and launch a seaborne attack, demonstrates that they have been stealing a huge percentage of global aid that was supposed to go to Palestinians who are hungry and living in poverty to spend it on their vast tunnel and weapons systems. They currently have fuel, food and water while the Palestinian people do not.

5. If you know people who chant “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free,” they need to know what the chant means. It means that from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, land that currently includes the Palestinian West Bank, Israel, and the Gaza strip, would all be Palestine, meaning there would be no Israel. Historically, this slogan has been combined with calls to “wipe Israel off the map.” Given that Jews have a history of thousands of years living in that land, and given that most Israelis have nowhere else in the world where they could go, that chant is calling for the murder of the 7 million Jews who live in Israel. This fits with the Hamas charter, which explicitly calls for the murder of Jews. Progressive participants in these marches, who are chanting these slogans, should ask themselves: if their cause is just and humane, why so often are there people with swastikas and Nazi messages marching alongside them?
6. The slogan “Free Palestine” is confusing. Does it mean that the occupation of the West Bank and the previous siege of Gaza by Israel should end, and there should be a free Palestinian state next to a free Israeli state? If so, I want to carry that banner. I want a Free Palestine, as so many of us do. And that is why we speak clearly and loudly against the occupation and protest the Israeli government’s treatment of Palestinians. It has to change. Or does it mean that Israel’s very existence is an occupation, that Israel itself is a “colonial state”, and that Jews have no real history in the land and no right to be there? Because that’s what a lot of people mean when they say “Free Palestine.” When people say “Free Palestine” or write “Israel” in quotemarks, as if it is not a real or legitimate country inhabited by more than 9 million people, what are they proposing the Jews in Israel are supposed to do? Move back to Yemen, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Morocco, Russia, or Europe where they were the remnant who survived the annihilation of 6 million of our people? Or where they were violently expelled and dispossessed? The whole point of Israel is that there was nowhere safe in the world for Jews to go, and so we chose the place that had been our home since at least 1300 BCE. That home also belonged to Palestinians, and the history of their displacement is shameful, and the history of the occupation is shameful, and both deserve full atonement. But a solution that only champions Palestinians on the land is as bad as a solution that only champions Israelis on the land – those solutions are inhumane and immoral, and will only lead to more suffering for both peoples. If you want to say “Free Palestine” make clear that you think

Israel should also exist. It's not hard. You can say "Free Palestine, Free Israel." "Pro-Palestine, Pro-Israel." "Free Palestine. Safe Israel." It's not hard.

7. The slogan that was written in front of our building Thursday night: Save Gaza, Save Humanity, harkens back to thousands of years of messages about Jews, that Jews do not count among "humanity," and that Jews are the obstacle to saving humanity. If only Jews would accept Jesus as our savior, well then humanity would be saved, right? Or, as it was said in German, it's the "Jewish problem" that's holding back the greatness of the people. Or if only the Jews weren't behind the scenes secretly manipulating the economy and the media and causing religious conflict, the world could finally have justice and peace. That's from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a work of fiction which promotes these lies about Jews. According to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is the most widely published antisemitic material in modern times. The Nazi party in Germany printed 23 editions, Henry Ford had it translated into 16 languages, today there are books based on it all around the world, even in places where there are almost no Jews, like Japan. Many school textbooks in the Arab and Islamic world teach it today as fact. Hamas uses the Protocols to justify its terrorism against Israeli civilians. And several hundred thousand internet sites disseminate and sell its lies. And so we shouldn't be surprised that the lies in it show up everywhere, even among Jews.

If there is anyone out there who still thinks even now that Jews are so safe in the world that we don't need our own country, or if there is anyone out there who still thinks that Jews would be just fine as a minority in a Palestinian state, you either have very magical thinking or you do not care whether Jews live or die.

But it's not only the left who have it wrong. The right also have it wrong. About Netanyahu and his Jewish-supremacist, religious-extremist, settler cronies who are still in the Israeli government. They are not the good guys either. Ninety percent of Israeli Jews blame Netanyahu for October 7. Netanyahu's government left Israelis undefended because they were so busy dividing the country, dismantling the democracy, supporting illegal settlements in an attempt to annex the West Bank and make a Palestinian state impossible, and inciting racist

violence against Palestinian people. Believe it or not, Netanyahu actually worked to strengthen Hamas over the last several years in contrast with the Palestinian Authority which his government wanted to debilitate. Three weeks before the Hamas attack, Israeli police cleared the Al Aqsa mosque of Muslim worshippers so that extremist settlers could go onto the Temple Mount, a major violation for Muslims. The settlers threatened that one day they will destroy the Al Aqsa Mosque and rebuild the Jewish Temple. On the day before the Hamas attack, in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood of East Jerusalem where Israeli settlers have been seizing Palestinian homes, non-violent protesters were violently attacked and arrested by Israeli police.

According to Rabbi Noa Sattath of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, since the Hamas attack, 86 Palestinians in the West Bank have been killed by settlers and the military. A leader of a Palestinian women's organization was arrested for posting on social media that the occupation is the root of the violence. There have been crackdowns in the universities. 10,000 people who had permits to be in Israel from Gaza have had their permits revoked and those who were in Israel at the time of the attacks are being interned on a military base in the West Bank.

The American right wing, including the Jewish right wing, also have it wrong when they blame liberal and progressive Jews for the failures and antisemitism of the left, as Donald Trump did on Rosh Hashanah, and as a rightwing Jew named Brooke Goldstein did on Twitter this week. She said "I'm wondering if all the so-called progressive "Jewish" organizations and reform rabbis are still asking you to post Black Lives Matter and support all the social justice woke causes now that it's undeniable that they are pro-Hamas.... How did they enable these antisemites? By marching lockstep behind them. By abandoning Jewish pride for Jewish appeasement."

First of all, the fact that progressive and liberal Jews are getting attention from Donald Trump means that we're more powerful than we know. We are the majority of the Jewish people. And as I said in my Rosh Hashanah sermon, we are starting to take our place and lift our voices as that liberal, progressive majority. If you want to be part of the liberal Jewish majority in New York and to lift up our voices, New York Jewish Agenda is the organization making that happen and we need your support.

Yes, we do stand up for black lives and LGBT rights and refugee rights and climate action. And yes, we equally, loudly, clearly stand against antisemitism. In the last few weeks, we have seen starkly that we've been in broad coalition with people who are indifferent to whether Jews live or die, or who even celebrate our deaths. People who only see Palestinian lives as valuable. People who think Israel should not exist. People who are willing to march next to those who are holding swastikas. That's incredibly painful to see. There must be a reckoning about antisemitism in all of our coalitions, networks and relationships. But Black lives still matter, as do trans rights and refugee rights and reproductive rights and the earth. Those things haven't changed.

Those causes are still essential for our collective well-being, and I call upon the leaders of all progressive movements and all liberation movements to study the history of antisemitism, in particular the book *AntiJudaism* by David Nirenberg, to truly understand the sickness that you are a part of, a sickness that does not help your cause, that does not make any people more free, that makes you vulnerable to division and attacks from the right, and that puts you on the wrong side of history.

And I say to the Jewish right and the larger right, that we have no chance of engaging in that reckoning about antisemitism if we have no relationships in progressive networks. Withdrawing from those relationships does not make us more safe. Those Jews on the right who have refused to show empathy for black people in America or trans people or refugees cannot now expect their empathy for Jews. It is only we, progressive and liberal Jews who have genuinely cared and shown up again and again and again who have any chance of appealing to progressive communities to be seen in our full humanity now. That is what my New York Times piece last week was exactly aimed to do. And...and.... the right needs to take responsibility for supporting an Israeli government and a right wing Israeli agenda whose immoral behavior and abuse of power is a major factor in how we got here.

So what does this all mean for the war? Rabbi Noa Sattath suggested five principles. First, Israel has a positive duty to ensure that Palestinians have enough food, water, and electricity, including by taking a humanitarian pause on the war so that the innocent people in Gaza, half of whom are children, have their basic needs met. That must happen today. Second, Israel must take every

action to protect civilian life from military attacks. We know that this is complicated sometimes because Hamas uses human shields. Still, this Israeli government has proven again and again that it does not value Palestinian lives and it has lost face, so the American government must make every effort to hold it accountable to protect innocent lives. This is part of the third point: Israel must adhere to international law. Fourth, Israel must commit to rebuilding everything that has been destroyed after the war. We know that Israel is trying to destroy many structures in Gaza to make the ground invasion as short as possible and to make the tunnels as accessible as possible, but everything that has been destroyed must be rebuilt. Fifth, if Palestinians can get out of harm's way through the Rafah crossing into Egypt, which I pray they will, and for Palestinians who have fled to the south of Gaza, Israel must commit that they will all be able to come home after the war. Finally, a plan must be made for the day after the war. The goal cannot be for Israel to re-occupy Gaza, even temporarily. That would be a disaster for everyone. If a goal is to remove Hamas, who will be their replacement and how will that happen? That question needs an answer. In addition, I would like to plead for a strategic pause for consideration about whether a ground war is likely to achieve outcomes that are worth the massive loss of life, both Israeli and Palestinian. And none of this, none of this, is about the most pressing of all priorities: the return of captives.

In our parasha, Abraham hears that his nephew Lot has been taken captive by four kings, and goes in pursuit of them, risking his life to free his kinsman. He redeems Lot and brings him home safely. In time, the Rabbinic Sages used this story as the basis for a mitzvah incumbent on every Jew in every age, *pidyon shvuyim*, the redeeming of captives. Countless times in our history, Jewish people have been taken hostage by kings, pirates, thieves, and terrorists, and the response from the worldwide Jewish community has been to see those captives as our own kin, to use all of the resources at our disposal to free them. There is a famous story of four well-known rabbis of the 10th century who were on a boat near Italy when pirates took them captive. The Jewish communities of Spain, North Africa, and Egypt rallied to ransom and free the rabbis. In the 17th century, the Jews of Constantinople, Salonika, and Venice freed 20,000 Polish Jews. Even though the Mishnah warned that we should not pay inflated sums to free fellow Jews because it would only encourage kidnappers to take more captives, Jewish communities did pay enormous amounts to free Jewish



hostages over the years. They did so in honor of another teaching in the Mishnah, that to save a single life is to save an entire world – that a price cannot be placed on human life, that every life has infinite value.

But today, Israeli families of the hostages say that the government is not helping, is not focused on them, and appointed a minister for hostage negotiation who had no experience. These families were angered that a recent statement by a military spokesman did not even mention the hostages as a goal.

220 of our kin are currently captive in tunnels under Gaza. This must be our greatest priority – the greatest priority of the Israeli government, the greatest priority of the American government's involvement, and the greatest priority of Jews throughout the world. We must stay focused on this goal above all others.

Ultimately, everyone needs to be thinking about how current actions affect the future. The only future that makes any sense is one in which both peoples – Palestinians and Israelis – live side by side on the land, in two states. Actions on the battlefield should be conducted with that goal in mind. That vision would lead to clear priorities – to minimize suffering and loss of life as much as possible while working to debilitate Hamas and bring the hostages home.

This is the parasha where the first Jews, Abraham and Sarah, are told that they will be made into a great nation, and they will be blessed, that their name will be great and they will be a blessing. We, the Jewish people, are an extraordinary people – a tiny but great nation – who deserve to be seen in our full humanity by all of the nations around us. Our people have been blessed with incredible resilience and creativity and have developed beautiful cultures throughout our history around the world despite the world's hatred of us. Instead of the lies that are told about us, our people deserve for our name to be great, associated with our sages and prophets, our leaders and scholars, our visionaries and dreamers,

so many of our people who have made the world better for having been in it, so many of our people who have made their lives a blessing.

May we now strive for those highest examples among our people, for the highest values in our Torah, and may we do all that is in our power, all that is in our power, to be a blessing.